

1-1-1992

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Sonny Guild
Guild@bible.acu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Guild, Sonny (1992) "The Ministry of Presence: A Biblical View," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss2/3>

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The Ministry of Presence: A Biblical View

By Sonny Guild

The call came at 4 a.m. The voice on the other end was strained and weak. "John had a heart attack and is dead," she said. I quickly dressed and went to be with Mary in those early, dark hours before dawn. I am not sure what I said. Mary probably cannot remember either.

Who can think clearly at 4:30 a.m. anyway? Who is ever prepared for such a call, prepared with the "right words"? Who thinks conversation will come easily while sitting in a room with a friend and the body of her husband of 30 years? I do remember we prayed. When such occasions arise, words are not as important as the presence of another person. Knowing you are not alone, knowing someone cares is transforming. Sometimes the transformation is as simple as to hope you will make it through the night.

A call to ministry is a call to participate in the lives of others. It is more a commitment to give others a personal presence than simply to give them words. When I have less concern about the right words and more concern for being present in people's lives ministry becomes more meaningful.

God, the Father, is the one who models this kind of ministry for us. Yes, he does communicate and always has the right words. Yet, a major

concern, a **first** concern of his is fellowship, making his presence known, participating in our lives. If Adam felt alone after giving names to all the creatures, he must have been devastated when he was deprived of God's personal presence.

God's Presence With His Servants

It is this fellowship, lost in the garden, that God through the history of redemption is working to restore. Before the ultimate revelation of his Son and the eventual fellowship realized through Christ Jesus, God was at work, giving himself personally to his people. His presence was known, acting in their lives, responding to their needs, and bringing deliverance. This is the story line of the Bible.

God went beyond promising his presence. In numerous concrete ways he gave evidence that he was in their midst. The angel of Yahweh (Gen. 22:11, 15-16; 31:11-13; Ex. 3:2-5); the glory of Yahweh (Ex. 24:15-17; 40:34-38); the name of Yahweh (Ex. 3:14); the face of Yahweh (Ex. 33:14-15); and the Ark of the covenant (Num. 10:33-36) were all demonstrations or reminders of the presence of God.¹

Of particular significance was the name of God. In the world of the Old Testament, names were more than the means by which to refer to someone. Names gave insight into character. When Moses requested God's name he was essentially asking, "What kind of god are you?" Moses was at a critical moment in his life. God was asking him to return to Egypt, and he needed to know if God could be trusted. Would God be with him as he faced the overwhelming task of confronting Pharaoh and

Sonny Guild is the Pulpit Minister for the Southwest Church of Christ, Tigard, Oregon.

leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. He was concerned about God's presence with him as much as his character.² The name spoken to Moses, Yahweh, reflected that God would be present in his life. In English Yahweh more nearly represents, "I am really and truly present, ready to help and to act, as I have always been."³ The emphasis is upon the reality of who God is and his presence at that moment.

What could be more important to Moses and his people than to know the presence of God as they stepped from the known to the unknown, from slavery to freedom? When Moses gave his first objection to the mission of delivering Israel, God's reply had to do with presence, not miraculous help. "I will be with you" (Ex. 3:12). Yahweh's presence and his help were essential to Moses. While the demonstrations of God's power in the court of Pharaoh and on the shore of the Red Sea were reminders of his presence, it was the reassurance that he was with them which was of primary importance.

Those leaders of Israel who followed Moses needed and received the same reassurance. Joshua was given the difficult task of replacing the great leader Moses. His heart was filled with anxiety, and God drew near and ministered to those needs and feelings. God addressed the moment in terms of presence. "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage" (Josh. 1:5-6a). This exhortation to be strong and courageous was stressed with Joshua repeatedly (1:7, 9, 18). Sufficient courage and strength would only come from knowing that Yahweh was with him. The subsequent signs he witnessed and the victories he experienced were but confirmations of Yahweh's presence.

As Gideon faced his own insurmountable task, he sought the same reassurance from Yahweh, "The Present One." He was doubtful about the greeting he received, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor" (Judges 6:12). He was also given a confirming sign, but the sign had no power or meaning other than to affirm that what God said was true and could be trusted. God would be present in his life.

The prophets also knew Yahweh's presence. The work of a prophet was difficult at best. During a desperate time in Judah's history Jeremiah was given an unpopular message to deliver, and God fortified him with the promise of his presence. "Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord" (Jer. 1:8). God's presence was always meaningful, but the commitment to be there, especially when the task or the moment was difficult, was particularly critical.

In speaking about commitment, Lewis Smedes says that personal commitment has two components: consistency and care. "Consistency is our predictability; care is our personal presence."⁴ God has shown his servants not only that he can be counted upon but that he cares deeply, demonstrated by his presence with them.

To speak of God's presence is also to speak of his nearness to his people. It is this understanding of the nearness of God that gave a unique quality to the religion of Israel.

God's Presence With Israel

God's presence was known not just by individuals, but also by the community of faith. In Israel's experience the presence of God was known by how he acted on her behalf. Israel's definition of God was not acquired through systematic theology or speculative thought. Instead, Israel sought to explain events that led to her existence.⁵ What God did was the means by which Israel came to understand him. His deeds proclaimed his presence in her midst, especially as he and his people lived in a covenant relationship.

To speak of God's presence is also to speak of his nearness to his people. It is this understanding of the nearness of God that gave a unique quality to the religion of Israel. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 4:7, "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" This understanding had special significance because of Israel's redemptive needs. At the center of Israel's faith was the proclamation that Yahweh had heard the cry of his weak, oppressed people in Egypt and responded with redemptive, life-changing power. When Israel recounted her faith it was always in terms of Yahweh's redemptive handiwork in her midst.⁶

The life of Israel was built on covenant with God and an absolute belief that God was in her midst. God's presence was a religious dichotomy. That is, God was both transcendent and personally present to Israel.⁷ This is the mystery and paradox

of the story. While preserving his transcendence, God stepped into the realm of human experience and ministered to the needs of his people. He chose to be in their midst because there was no other way for their needs to be addressed. It was precisely because God was both transcendent and personally present that redemptive possibilities were brought about for Israel.

However, the story of Israel was not always

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one of nearness to God. The tragedy of Adam's fall was reflected repeatedly in the unfaithfulness of God's people. There were times when God's presence was not with them (Judges 7:12f.), or they questioned or doubted his presence (Pss. 10, 22, 55). To cry out to God when circumstances belied his nearness was perhaps part of the process of knowing his presence again. Memory of his presence ministered to the moment as God's people suffered defeat or had to wait in faith for God's deliverance. Whether in current experience or in memory, God's presence had power to minister. Yahweh's presence blessed them, shaped them and gave them hope. Nothing was more comforting and life transforming as the presence of Yahweh.⁸

God's Presence in Christ

As the story of redemption reached its fulfillment in Christ, a more direct manifestation of God's presence was known. God himself drew near as he participated in life in the flesh. He was in reality what the prophets (Isaiah 7:14) had pointed to, Immanuel, "God with us."

God made his presence known as he again responded to the needs of a desperate people. He was again on a redemptive mission. Isaiah penned it first (Isaiah 61:1-2), and Jesus applied it to himself (Luke 4:18-19). He came with good news for the poor. His was a proclamation of release for prisoners, sight for the blind and liberty for the oppressed. He proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord. What better way to address the needs of humankind and to make such proclamations of good news than through God in the flesh!

Jesus' coming in the flesh was a necessity. The transcendent God was the Yahweh of presence. In Christ, God was present in the midst of human life because there was no other way to meet human need. The writer of Hebrews stated it best.

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:14-18).

It is astonishing that God came to us, drew near to us, in the flesh. It is even more astonishing that he entered into the experience of death with us. That journey into death was his redemptive mission, his greatest challenge, on our behalf. Could it be that as he stood with us at the cross, in the face of death, he felt uncomfortable, as we often do? Nevertheless, he stood with us. His embrace of the cross on our behalf required his presence in the flesh.

God's Presence Through The Holy Spirit

The necessity of the cross to the redemptive purpose of Christ was an unfolding reality for the disciples. Long before their understanding was complete they were joyful to be his disciples. He was important to them, and they were distressed at the thought of losing his presence (John 13:31-14:14). To think they would no longer have intimate fellowship with Jesus was shattering. Jesus understood the need for presence, God's presence, in the lives of humankind. He did not intend to leave them desolate and promised to send another counselor, the Spirit of Truth (John 14:16-18).

The Holy Spirit became God's presence in the lives of believers. He was not only with them, he was in them. Quoting from Joel 2:28-32, Peter explains that the giving of the Spirit was an overriding understanding of what happened at Pentecost. The

Spirit was made available to all whom the Lord saved and fulfilled Jesus' promise when he left the earth, "I will be with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

God, in both the Old and New Testaments, was moved to give his presence to his people. Christ fulfills the promise of God to be with us and dwells in our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:16-17). His abiding presence may be realized in a redemptive act or in providing strength and courage for the moment. Certainly it is experienced through his nearness to us. This is a model of ministry for the church today, fashioned by God himself.

Presence Ministers to Overwhelmed People

Our world has become too individualized and isolated. People often work with machines more than with people. Self-centeredness is the hallmark of our society, and people are left on their own to deal with the difficulties of life. God's presence is needed.

Frequently we are reluctant to respond to a need because we do not have the "right words" to say. The fear of being in an uncomfortable situation keeps us isolated from the hurts of others. The reality is that for many deep hurts there are no magic words. What men and women need most is to know that there are others in their lives who are not afraid to walk the valleys with them. Sometimes admittedly we walk fearfully, longing for "right words." But, sometimes silence and the presence of another who cares is the greatest comfort we can provide. Words are often forgotten, but the memories of caring faces are not.

Presence is important. Jesus, on the night he was to face his greatest test went out to pray. Mark says he was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:34). He asked Peter, James, and John to go with him. His one request of them was to stay and keep watch. Their presence was needed by our Lord. I am not sure I understand why. Perhaps this illustrates one of the powerful and meaningful ways we minister to overwhelmed people. To know someone else cares and is there with you is the critical need of the moment.

The following poem reflects how we can be

mistaken about what really ministers to people.

I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealing, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly; he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he'd go away. He finally did.

Another came and sat beside me. He did not talk. He did not ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour or more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.⁹

The presence of a Christian has meaning beyond having just another body in the room. The ministry of presence is a ministry given to all believers. We are all priests in service to God. We are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), and as priests we mediate God's presence.

When Christians express their care and love for another by being present they are also expressing Jesus' loving concern. We are more familiar with the idea of being his body. The Christian, as a member of the community of faith, is a priest in service to God. The priest brings the Father onto the scene. It may not be spoken. It may be a prayer. It may be only knowing and being thankful that we share a relatedness because of God. Nevertheless, through our caring we share the presence of the Father.

Your call may not come at 4 a.m., but it will come. The challenge for us is like that for Israel. How shall we live in view of the kind of God we worship? God has been present and available, so will his people be present and available to others. As his care for us has been manifest in tangible ways, our caring should also be revealed by our presence. Being present with those who hurt and are overwhelmed, however uncomfortable we may be, is often the act of deliverance they need most.